

Matthew 22:34-23:12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Matthew chapter 22 verse 34 to chapter 23 verse 12. But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?

And he said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment, and a second is like it.

You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets. Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he? They said to him, The son of David.

He said to them, How is it then that David, in the spirit, calls him Lord, saying, The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet?

If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son? And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

[1 : 12] Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat, So do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens hard to bear and lay them on people's shoulders. But they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others.

For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honour at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.

And call no man your father on earth, for you have one father who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

At the end of Matthew chapter 22, the challenging of Jesus by the religious and the political leaders continues and then is concluded. The Pharisees present the third question to test Jesus here, and perhaps we should recognise some similarities with Satan's testing of Christ early in the gospel. These questions are malicious tests, not honest and innocent questions. They gather together against the Lord. And that language should remind us of the second psalm. Bear in mind the conversation that follows, where it is the anointing of the Davidic king that is at issue, the Davidic messiah.

[2 : 51] And the Pharisees gathering together against Christ is similar to the nations gathering together against the Lord and his anointed in that psalm. They are hoping that Jesus is going to choose some particular law that reveals an imbalance in his teaching. Perhaps the greatest commandment is you shall not commit adultery, or maybe remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Whatever Jesus answers, he will seem to tread on some toes and open himself up to some criticism that he has unbalanced teaching. But Jesus' answer once more is incredibly shrewd. The greatest commandment, and there is a greatest commandment, is the summary commandment of the Shema. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And that statement is the greatest commandment. In this commandment, the entire law is encapsulated, and the second great commandment arises from it. These two commandments sum up the entire ten commandments and all the other attendant commandments. The law is not just a collection of 600 plus miscellaneous laws. It's a system of truth and justice summed up in the call to love God and

neighbour. These positive commandments that lie at the heart of all these negative restrictions. You can think about the two statements that Jesus references in their original context. In Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 4 to 5, the statement about loving the Lord your God, that comes immediately after the gift of the ten commandments, or the repetition of the ten commandments in chapter 5, and it's the beginning of all that summary material, all the material that follows from it and helps to flesh out what that commandment means. Leviticus chapter 19 is where the law concerning loving your neighbour comes from, and there that commandment comes at the end of a list of other commandments. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge. Neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest, and you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner. I am the Lord your God. You shall not steal. You shall not deal falsely. You shall not lie to one another. You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God.

I am the Lord. You shall not oppress your neighbour or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until morning. You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God. I am the Lord. You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbour.

You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbour. I am the Lord. You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbour, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

I am the Lord. Now reading that list, you probably noticed that it sums up most of the second table of the Ten Commandments. We have the first table summed up in loving the Lord your God, and the second table summed up in loving your neighbour as yourself. And all of the law and the prophets flow from these two great principles, these positive principles at the heart of everything. And now we should see that this is antithetical to the way the Pharisees approached the law. The Pharisees seem to approach the law just as a miscellaneous series of commandments. They do not have a sense of its inner motion and its inner purpose and dynamic. Rather, it's something that's just a set of legalistic binding commands, and nothing more. There's no sense of the love that lies at the heart of it. And what Jesus teaches here is that there is a logic to the law, and that logic is love for God and neighbour. And we will not truly understand why Jesus dumbfounds the Pharisees until we realise just how powerfully his teaching here undermines their entire approach to the law. These commandments express the positive truth at the heart of all the thou shalt nots. And those positive truths are the whole subject matter of the law and the prophets throughout the entire scriptures. It's these principles that stand in the dead centre of everything. Everything arises out of these. Jesus poses a challenge in response to the Pharisees' challenge to him, and his challenge is about the Christ, referencing Psalm 110. It is a Davidic psalm in which David refers to the Christ as his Lord, which makes no sense at all if the Christ is merely his son.

And the Pharisees clearly don't have a way of thinking about this. They don't have a category within which this would make sense. The Christ seems to be more than merely the son of David, according to the flesh. There's obviously some theological problem here. How do we deal with this? [7 : 53] And at this point, the Pharisees are completely unable to answer him. They're stuck. They're dumbfounded. They're stumped. In chapter 23, we see Jesus moving on to speak to the crowds and to his disciples.

Jesus began in chapter 5 by gathering his disciples around him and then the crowd around them, and now he's speaking to the same sort of group. This reminds us then of the Sermon on the Mount. This is the final great message of the Gospel of Matthew, and the Sermon on the Mount is the first great message.

And as we look at this message more closely, we'll begin to observe ways in which there is a symmetry between it and the opening sermon. What we have here is something binding the book together, that there's a unity to Jesus' message, and the teaching that he goes through has a logic and an order to it, and Jesus' entire teaching has been leading to the point that he reaches in this chapter. This chapter will sum up the entire message of his teaching, and Matthew really does focus upon Jesus' teaching to a greater degree than most of the other Gospels. In this message,

having overcome the challenges of the religious and political leaders, Jesus speaks to the crowds and the disciples concerning them.

He has also just spoken of the fact that the Christ, who he is, will sit at God's right hand, with all of his enemies being placed under his feet, being made his footstool. Christ is the true king, and now he speaks concerning the false shepherds of Israel. Jesus' challenge throughout this chapter is focused upon the false shepherds of Israel, not upon the flock of Israel. The false shepherds are the wicked vinedressers. They're the people who dishonoured the king, who invited them to the wedding. The flock of Israel are like the sheep without the shepherd. They are like the vineyard that is going to be given into the hands of those who will produce its fruit. The Pharisees currently sit in Moses' seat, and much of their teaching is correct and legitimate and should be followed. But their lives are full of hypocrisy, and their vision of the law is burdensome and oppressive. They're ignorant of the true liberating intent at the heart of the law. They have all these commandments that they speak in terms of, but they're ignorant of justice, mercy, and faith, those principles at the heart. They do not recognise the way that love is the binding truth behind all of the law, the glue that holds everything together. And so they just have these burdensome commands. They lay heavy burdens upon the people, not like Moses in whose seat they sit, but like Pharaoh, the one who Moses stood against. They're concerned with the praise of men and with social status. They love the markers and the honorific titles of the religious authority, the special seats that they're given, the special titles and names that they enjoy. And there's some exaggeration and satire here, no doubt, much as in the earlier descriptions that Christ gives of people sounding a trumpet before them when doing their charitable works.

But the new shepherds that will take their place must not follow such an example. The ministry of Christ's body must be characterised by humility. The point isn't to dismiss all titles. We see the apostles using titles on occasions. No, the point is not so much a strict denial of the legitimacy of all titles or respect of ministers of Christ. No, it's about the nature of that ministry. It's a ministry that is honoured, but it's honoured precisely in the practice of self-effacing ministry in Christ's name to others. It isn't exalted over others. It's a ministry performed by brothers, not by those who are over us. Personality cults and cults of church office have no place in the kingdom. Honour comes in a completely different form from that which the Pharisees seek. Those who seek to exalt themselves will be humbled. But the flip side of this reveals the true character of ministry in the kingdom of God. The one who humbles himself will be exalted. This is what Christ himself does. And this whole passage emphasises the uniqueness of Christ. Christ is the one who sits at God's right hand. All of us are under the Christ. All of us are ministers of Christ. We're sent by him and we are responsible to him. And all true ministry flows from and points to Christ, not to itself. If our ministry is pointing to ourselves, then it is a false ministry. It's not a true ministry of Christ.

[12 : 32] A question to consider. How do we see Paul applying some of Jesus' teaching here in places like 1 Corinthians chapter 1?